DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 051 235 TE 002 452

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TITLE Poet in the Schoolhouse (Evoking Creative Energy in Language).
PUB DATE 70
NOTE 12p.; Speech given at the Annual Convention of the National Council of Teachers of English (60th, Atlanta, November 1970)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Creative Teaching, *Creative Writing, *Disadvantaged Youth, Language Arts, *Poetry, *Teaching Techniques

ABSTRACT

A teachers experience in teaching disadvantaged children to write creatively is described. Conclusions drawn are that teachers must learn to accept the language of the children; children should be allowed to invent the language by which they manage their own world; no arbitrary limits should be placed on the range of experience and language used in the classroom; and writing must not be estranged from the other arts such as acting, music, drawing, and dance. (DB)

ED051235

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Eric CEE B.21

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POET IN THE SCHOOLHOUSE
(Evoking Creative Energy in Language)

The sad confrontation that occurred in New York City during the fall of 1968 between the unions and communities that were seeking to salvage their kid's lives from a foundering urban school system, locked my own kids out of school alomg with the others. One week of sleeping in and helping to man a school opened my head to a world of possibility. From inside I saw a system which had become depersonalized and technician-oriented. The parents, mostly black, pooled their resources, and with sensitivity for the needs of the children, learning was taking place.

A new world unfolded to me. I began to think of how at this stage of my life I could continue to work with the living poetry that children are. A door opened a bit when I received a request from the Center for Urban Education to join their Creative Energy Project as a poet. Their aim was to provide for children whose education had been interrupted, the enrichment of workshop activities which provide direct contact with artists and performers of the various arts: Theatre, Dance, Painting, Music, Filmmaking and Creative Writing. It was a pleasure to commit myself to the progam.

While the voices of parents and teachers had been heard in the angry struggle to clarify structures of education, we knew almost nothing about the feelings of those in whose name the crisis had been suffered. We had not heard from the students. How would they express themselves? From the eye of the storm, what would they report? What would their individual and group expressions tell us about their reactions and their needs? The crisis appeal by the center said: "By enlisting the aid of artists who are willing and able to act as catalysts, not imposing but evoking their responses we can provide some extraordinary outlets for constructive expressions. They need to tell us and we need to hear from them now."

In this difficult period after the restoring of instruction, a more enduring goal was presented. To introduce experiences and new possibilities of enlarged access to the arts for both the children and the teachers.

Knowledge that gives a "sense of delight" and "the gift of intellectual travel"* is the only thing worth knowing, according to Jerome Bruner. Usefulness, he says will take care of itself. The "wonder" and "surprise" introduced in life by creativity is the main source of that delight he seeks in the learning process. It is no wonder then that he sees as a major instrument for change, what he calls an "institute for curriculum studies...Let it be the place where scholars, scientists, men of affairs and artists come together with talented teachers continually to revise and refresh our curriculum...We have been negligent in coming to a sense of the quickening change of life in our time and its implications for the educational process. We have not shared with our teachers the benefits of new discovery, new insight, new artistic triumph... Let the educational process be life itself."**

For children the approach to art is like their approach to play. Both are approaches to enjoyment and both are within real life. Children can take up the tools and ideas of art to play with them and reveal their creative energy freely. The pride and involvement children feel about their expressions tells us about the qualities of identity and importance which are invested in them. The special opportunity which was before us was also a test of the values of the artist-in-residence concept for elementary and secondary schools.

This experience became a gateway to me for a more fruitful time in my own life. The experience of my previous life as sailor, newspaperman and poet (and father) could now be used where it could do the most good. I have ever since have been associated with the Teachers and Writers Collaborative.

The findings of those of us who have been working as writers in the schools concur that all children--white and black; poor and wealthy--have an intense inner life that has been revealed in their writings, but which never before had been exposed in school. This inner life as revealed in the children's writings testifies to the complexities of the society around them. Children are aware of and concerned with sex, violence, racism, social and economic power, etc. In almost every case, writers who have gone into public

* J. S. Bruner, On Knowing, (Cambridge, 1962), p. 109.
** Ibid., p. 125.

school classrooms have been able to relate directly to the children and elicit written responses in a way that teachers had not been generally able to do. In most cases it was important to type up and "print" the children's work in either mimeographed or rexographed form. Seeing their work in print affirmed ~~that~~ for the children the validity and importance of their own thoughts, feelings and words, and inspired them to write more. They also, when confronted with the printed page, became more aware of spelling mistakes and the need to sharpen their reading skills in order to read their own work.

Herbert Kohl, who founded the Teachers and Writers Collaborative, discovered, with great pain, in front of a Harlem classroom, the need for the teacher to acquire authenticity to his students. He learned that the place to find such validity and relevancy was the lives of the children themselves. From this point on Kohl threw out his notes and lesson plans and started talking with the kids outside of the realm of hollow myths of a non-existent country. It was easier to face the world the children had to cope with.

As they wrote for weeks about where they came from, Kohl discovered that, "Everything I had been told about the children's language was irrelevant. Yes, they were hip when they spoke, inarticulate and concrete. But their writing was something else, when they felt that no white man was judging their words, threatening their confidence and pride...they wrote directly and honestly."*

Like Kohl, I have found that in spite of prevailing analyses of the "limited language" of the "disadvantaged" that there are heights of perception that supposedly "limited" children could soar to as they explore their own culture and life style, such as their street games.

The street is a garden of poetry where kids pass on by word of mouth a rich collection of folk lore that grows and changes with each generation. This was an area where I could both share and learn from them. There is nothing they like to talk about more than their own thing. And counting out, clapping, ~~XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX~~ rope

* Herbert Kohl, 36 Children, (New York, 1967), p. 50.

jumping chants, writing-on-the-wall (grafitti) and rankouts (dozens) are their thing. I approached this culture as a treasure hunt and came up with rich discovery in written reponses from the 6th, 7th and 8th graders that I visit regularly. Here is a sampling:

7

Old Dan Tucker was a mighty man
he washed his face with a frying pan
he combed his hair with a wagon wheel
and he died with a toothache in his heel.

Milk is Milk
Cheese is Cheese
What is a kiss
without a squeeze

Pork Chops, Pork Chops
Makes a little gravy
Your thing, his thing
Makes a little baby.

Constant exposure to the TV commercials creates a new source for imagery as the following show. They come from fifth graders.

Smoke Coca Cola cigarettes
Chew Wrigley spearmint beer
Kennel-ration dogfood makes your wife's complexion clear
Chocolate covered mothballs, they always satisfy
Brush your teeth with Lifebuoy soap and watch the suds go by
Take your next vacation in a brand new Frigidaire
Learn to play the piano in your winter underwear
Simonize your baby with a Hershey candy bar
Texaco's the beauty cream thats used by every star
Doctors say that babies should smoke until they're three
People over 60 use a brand named LIptons tea
If you want to make this song a better one today
Buy a record of it and break it right away...Hey!

Hi Lucy where are you
Upstairs on the toilet stool
What you doing way up there
Try to clear my underwear
How you manage to get them clean
Wash em up with Listerine
Where you get the Listerine
Went down town to Mrs. Clean.

The topical nature of street poetry is shown by how this one has swept the country via the children's grapevine.

Ungawa black power
what you gonna do
box the boogaloo
what you think is best
hit them in the chest
I said beep bee,bang bang
Ungawa black power.

Obscenities become a language of its own, foreign to teachers who reject the culture <u>because</u> of the language.

Little Orphan Annie with the greasy granny
Frankenstein with the big behind
Cleopatra the titty snatcher
Motherfucker the titty sucker.

Innumerable connotations come from the word motherfucker, almost none of them having to do with the original origin. It could mean anything from hatred to admiration, depending on the situation. On the street words like this take on a meaning and express emotions outside the experience of middle class whites or middle class values. A boy discovers, especially in the environment of a public school that he cannot express what he feels about anything meaningful--like sex or race or discovery--in the language taught at school. This conflict is especially true for black youth because their lives give the lie to what they are taught in school. This is why the language of the toilet takes on for school youth such ambiguous, underground, yet viable meaning.

A schoolyard game more common than basketball is the Dirty Dozens. Its aim is to make the opponent "blow his cool" that is, cry, yell or fight, by making funny, insulting, sexual remarks about his family--his mother in particular. Boys get reputations for being good Dozens players just as they do for being "bad". (On the street, "bad" has good, even heroic connotations.) Often the Dozens rhyme like this one:

The way he's talking about you is a cryin' shame;
He say he rather ride your Momma than a choo-choo train!

On New York streets "ranking" is a different name for a less sexual version of the Dozens thath has gone beyond the black community. Rankouts transcend mere four-letter words; creativity and imagery are their forte. They are a form of found poetry that pick at the sores of poverty. The insults focus on ragged clothing, cramped and broken down apartments, the scarcity of food. They amount to an urban bestiary, featuring the roach, bug, mouse, and rat.

After generating some strong dialogues ~~going~~ in the 7th and 8th grade writing workshops I transform the verbalization into writing by telling them to "stop running off at the mouth and run it off the ends of their pencils so that I can add them to my collection for publication."

The walls in your house are so close together
that the mice have to walk single file.

If the man in front of me didn't have more
plaid stamps, I would have got your mother first.

I walked in your houde and I saw your father
directing roach traffic.

I slept in your house last night
and the roaches pushed me out of bed.

You can tell by your Momma's teeth
she eats Welfare meat.

Your mother wears Buster Brown shoes,
busted on the outside.

I came in your house and asked your mother
could I eat with you, she said yes. She put
a pea on my plate, and I said is this all.
She said don't be greedy.

I walked in your house and stepped on a roach
And your mother said save the white meat.

Your mother is like a doorknob
Everybody gets a turn.

So many in your family its a tribe.
Your mothers like a pig, alwqys hoggin' around.

Oh Man, there's so much dust in your house
the roaches be playing Lawrence of Arabia.

Baby, when I asked your mother If I could go to the bathroom
she handed me a flashlight and said good luck!

Good luck? I rang your doorbell the other day
and it made the toilet flush.

I walked in your house the other day and got hit
with a Wonder Bread--12 different ways.

When I asked your Ma for a glass of water, she said,
"Wait till the tide comes in.

This bitter humor is an attempt to deal with realities these children see and feel helpless to change. Their inability to understand or solve these problems leads to an obsession with them. Adults misinterpret this attempt of children to explore the reality

of the world around them by telling them that they are bad. For instance, after having been shown some of the rankouts written by a boy in her class, one teacher said, "Why encourage that, that is just what we are trying to take them away from. Why don't you have them write an essay on brotherhood."

One other aspect of the youth culture that has worked for me in the classroom and that I want to deal with is the pop music. If one has ears, one knows that the most pervasive aspect of their culture are the sounds and message of soul and rock. These twins, born out of that most poignant expression of personal and immediate human experience, the blues, are here to stay, and cannot be ignored. In fact, to the young people, their music and the lyrics are their literature. Its corporation into the English curriculum is long overdue. The Jackson Five, varying in age from 10 to 19, and replacing The Beatles as No, 1, tell it like it is:

You might not like it but
you better make way for the young Folks
here we come yeah yeah yeah yeah.

The music has been the most evocative material that I have used. I have accumulated a treasure of writing bearing its imprint. The evolving of this art form incorporates the whole texture of American history and becomes a vehicle for learning.

I start by telling how it all began with the blues in the deep south with the perdonal protest of the field hand wrapped into the lyrics. The heat of the delta sun and the surge of the Mississippi reached into their souls, throbbing out the beat of the blues. The movement of the cities upped the tempo and tension to big beat city blues, and now the young have added the magic of poetry and electronics.

The bluesmen are always at my side in the classroom via my portable tape player. John Lee Hooker's Teaching the Blues gives the basic beat and discipline, while Lightning Hopkins' I Heard My Children Crying really moves the class. Then we rap about the injustice of hungry kids in a world of plenty. B. B, King's Why I Sing the Blues brings it all up to date.

Otis Redding--a singer who helped convert teen-age America to rhythm and blues--sings Satisfaction and Shake causing vibrations to surge from everyone. I ude the line "shake it like a bowl of soup" to demonstrate how words can make one see (imagery) and "Sat-is-fak-shun" as the articulating of sound that starts fingers popping.

After reading blues lyrics with the proper beat stresses and intonation, I ask them to write a small blues, three or four lines, four beats to the line with the last line running on, carrying their own personal message with words that have a jazz sound. I always do the assignment myself and chalk one up on the board:

Some people think that school is just a mess
Some people think that school is all the best
But I think that together in this class
we sure can have some fun.

While their pencils are working, the player keeps spinning out a blues sound to give them a beat to write to. Sometimes I blow my blues harp (harmonica). Some kids may stare empty-eyed at their paper, but as I cruise around I rap with the idle ones in an effort to turn on their imagination. Somtimes I suggest that they try the title or a line from their favorite tune and try to build their own thing on that. One boy answered my query as to what idea he could think of with "Nothin". I said "Okay, let's write a bluelet about 'Nothin". This is what he turned in:

Oh man I have nothin' to do
I can't call my baby nor sing the blues
I have nothin' to do.....Nothin'. Mark Greene, 6/18

School seems to be one of the most popular themes among the sixth graders for singing the blues.

The blues is when it rains watch out kid
Here comes the blues. The blues
The blues is when you have to go to school. Don Clendon, 6S4

Today is a test oh what a mess
Oh my! I just remembered, two tests
I got the blues. I got the blues. Bonnie Leff, 6S3

School gets me sick since I came to 6/6
I wanted to stay in 6/7 but things didn't go
good for me. I just sick & tired of dumb school.
Karen Smith, 6/6

Some of the bluelets come on very topical, especially at times when urban problems are very much in the news.

SØBWAY BLUES
You make better time if you walk the track
Man I want my money back
Watcha think I have a lifetime to lose
That's why I have those subway blues. Valerie Weston,

POLLUTION BLUES
Its funky junk in the air its stunk
don't go near it or you'll flunk
I can't help it if junk is in the air and the sea
Cause dontcha blame it on me. Linda Williams, 6S3

In this city of old New York
I think we all feel like a cork
Its like a cap on a bottle
Everyone keeps putting you on.
Eric Perlman, 6S4

Many of the pieces point to personal concerns of family, identity, future, etc.

I left my job because I had to eat slob
and I was sad and I had to sit
in a garbage can and I was a bum
for seven years and never had a wife to
pinch my ears. Neal Monroe, 6/18

My father didn't know the meaning of work
he disrespected mama and treat us like dirt
So I got into a car and had a wreck
So all you need is a little respect. Linda Baldwin,6/7

and some wrote purely in a spirit of having fun with the sound and rhythm in words.

Its my thang and a ranga dang dang
Do what you want to do because
Its my thang and a rang a dang dang. Angelo Monroe

Times have not changed since Willie Shakespeare found the same joy in the sound of words:

In the springtime, the only pretty ring-time,
When birds do sing hey ding a ding, ding.*

and using the present as a bridge to what has come before works, provided you tell Shakespeare like it is, "with a hey, and a ho, and a hey nonino."*

Rock starts at this elemental and gutsy level of incantation that conveys mood:

XX * from As You Like It, Wm Shakespeare

Sha da da da sha da da da da
Sha da da da sha da da da da
.....get a job.

and

Who put the bomp
In the bomp-pa bomp-ba bomp.

I use songs like these to demonstrate oral sounds that help "seeing". Sometimes more is said by the pauses and the stresses than the actual meanings. This is the magic of rock and soul. It places an eye in the ear, the pipeline to the soul. With the sound of Miriam Makeba in back of me making Pata Pata, I dig in this soil of sound and come up with sensitive sound poems:

Beep beep mother she cheap
She walk walk in the street
and talk in her sleep
and she get me a beep
I weep in my sleep Cheryl 7/4

Man Man I lost a man
His name was Sam Sam Sam
Bop bop ram Sam man
I loved that man
He went bam bam slam.
Larry Coles, 6/16

Pata Pata whats the matter
You got to have soul to go go go
Nice and fly people always
get high why why why. Erica

Using words that "snap, crackle and pop" is fun and generally loosens up the pencils. Taking advantage of this, I make the point that to make poems and lyrics have rhythm it is necessary to go by some rules, just as a basketball game is played by some rules. One could either make ones own rules or use an established form. The classical five line cinquain has been useful. I ask for 22 syllables in a 2-4-6-8-2 pattern using crisp sounding words that convey soul, feeling and ideas from life. We call these poems Jazz Cinqs.

The street
I love it bsby
cuttin 'tween the zoomin cars
you gotta split when the seconds
right. Split man.
Alex Skoditch

The gang
the gang in the
street is bad with me we
hustle we fight we laugh out loud
the gang. Vincent Evans

People
Some people think
they're hip. Some people
they're cool but me--I know
I fly. Beryl Washington

It's love
its love that keeps
the bells ringing sharp cracks
the two of us are making time
its love. Julie Davis.

One could pursue this diction and sound into other forms. I have applied it to Haiku and called the results Rockus.

Tracking the rock trail in search of what there is in what

the kids are listening to that can become a key to turning on their own writing....and learning. I have found that rock in addition to its being history and ballad, is metaphor, with artists like Simon and Garfunkel, masters at it in pieces like I am a Rock, I am an Island and the magic of The Doors with "...she's a/20th century fox/inside a plastic box." I point this out and the writing of the children takes on metaphorical dimension like "I am the wind/ because I'm as cool as a breeze"; "I am a dot/I stay in one spot"; "I am a sponge/ I want to sop everybody up."

I'm a number
And when I'm in the deck
No one knows me yet. Ardiana Foss.

I am a tree
and trees can see everywhere
and up there its cool
and I find the inside of me
is made right
nothing is wrong
except for the outside
the people do not dig love and peace
but they should dig it. Joan

The imagery of rock verbally colors their grey urban life with "...a rose in Spanish Harlem/its growing in the street/right up through the concrete" (Leiber & Stoller) and "Hello lampost/ whatcha knowin'/I've come to watch your flowers growin'"(from Simon & Garfunkel). Songs like The Beatles' Nowhere Man and Eleanor Rigby speak to those struggling for identity. They evoke pieces like this one:

ABOUT DAVID
David dig this girl
But dont know how to tell her
So the man is uptight
In a world of his own.
And can't break out of his bag.
When the words come out
They sound like his rap is
But they don't last long
And he wish his rap was right
then he have to be right.
David McElween, 8th grade

There are many other areas within the very lives of the children that effective teaching demands an empathy for that I can't go into now. I have derived from my experience some principles that have spefic relevance in the English classroom but applies to all teaching.

The grading of written work should be eliminated. A child's writing should be considered as an intimate revelation of his

feelings and impressions, one to be respected. Teachers must learn to accept the language of the children without imposing arbitrary standards of usage that frustrates the free flow of expression. Early emphasis on 'correct' usage can make the act of writing no more than an anxious crippling exercise for many children.

Children should be allowed to invent the language by which they manage their own world. When children are encouraged to make uninhibited and imaginative use of their own verbal experience, their sensibilities will be more open to the power and sweep of language in the stories, myths, legends and poems of the literary tradition.

No arbitrary limits should be placed on the range of experience and language used in the classroom. If children or teachers feel that words or references or ideas that are important to them must be censored--or are 'out of bounds'--then the classroom itself can become a sterile and irrelevant place.

Writing must not be estranged from the other arts. Acting, music, drawing and dance can all be used in telling a story.

What greater gratification can a teacher get than to receive letters like this at the end of a school year:

> Dear Mr. Artburger,
> I dig your shop. You have soul. I like your poems, you bring out the feelings in your poems. You tell it like it is. You know hip talk and hip dances, and blow a cool harp too. I & I mean it Mr. Artburger you have soul. I wish my regular teacher had soul. We'd be having fun every day. You would b e a fly teacher Mr. Burger.
>
> Allen Sampson, 7/7

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